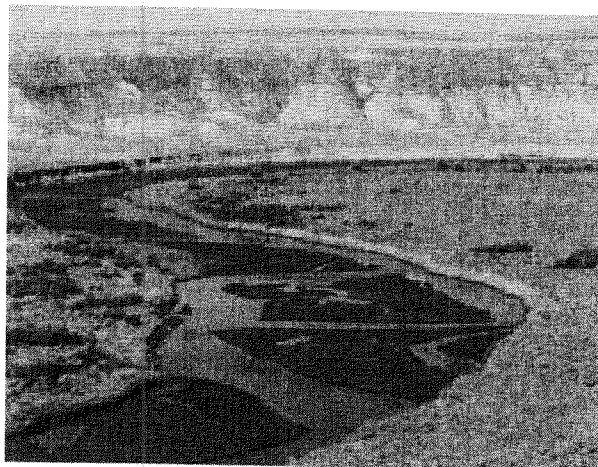


More landowners ending access over Milk River Ranch purchase



JANUARY 04, 2013 10:18 AM • ASSOCIATED PRESS

GREAT FALLS — More landowners in north-central Montana are joining the protest of the state's purchase of a ranch along the Milk River by closing their land to public recreation.

Thirteen landowners announced Thursday that they also were closing their property to hunting and fishing to protest a decision by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission to buy a nearly 3,000-acre ranch for \$4.7 million.

The protest is now closing 30 properties with a total of 100,000 acres of land.

FWP says the Milk River Ranch is part of an important wildlife corridor between Canada and the United States. The Department of Natural Resources and Conservation purchased another 1,500 acres for \$1.1 million.

Opponents say the state acted too quickly and paid too much for the land.



MILK RIVER RANCH

FWP votes to buy Milk River Ranch

Price for FWP is \$4.7 million



DECEMBER 11, 2012 11:22 AM • BY EVE BYRON
INDEPENDENT RECORD

After more than two hours of sometimes heated testimony Monday, the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission voted 4-1 to purchase 2,992 acres on the Milk River Ranch north of Havre for \$4.7 million.

The decision is the final step toward putting the entire 4,505-acre ranch — which includes about 10 miles of the Milk River and is owned by Verges and David Ageson — into public hands.

FWP will use the bottomland as a wildlife management area; the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation purchased the ranch's other 1,513 acres last month for about \$1.1 million. The Board of Regents also agreed to pay \$2 million to the Agesons for the rights to paleontological and archaeological artifacts on the land, bringing the total sale price to \$7.8 million.

Commissioner Bob Ream noted how the ranch borders Canada, and how that country already has set aside large swaths of land as a wildlife corridor and habitat. He said that not only would this purchase add to their efforts, he's also thrilled with the way FWP worked with DNRC and the Regents to make the sale happen.

"All in all, for the benefit for the state of Montana as well as in the long run, I think this is now an opportunity we can't pass up," Ream said.

Commissioner Ron Moody adamantly disagreed.

"I have listened carefully for new information that would change my view of this piece of business and I remain firmly opposed to this purchase," Moody said.

He adds that he admires and respects the Ageson family for their objectives for the land, as well as for negotiating with FWP in good faith.

"But as a commissioner, I'm clearly charged with being an effective public trustee, to spend that money to the best advantage of the people who contributed that money," Moody said. "I cannot get past the feeling that we need another appraisal. If I was making this purchase with my own money and this appraisal came in as it did, I would want a second appraisal."

FWP officials had expected the land appraisal to come in at \$2.8 million instead of the \$4.7 million. In addition, they had anticipated using federal funds raised by the sale of guns and ammunition for the purchase; when that fell through they turned to the Habitat Montana fund, which comes from the sale of hunting licenses in Montana.

The purchase drained that fund, with new money for other projects not being available until the next fiscal year for Montana begins in July 2013.

About 70 people testified during the conference call hearing, with about 65 speaking in opposition to the sale of "stones and bones" and seven in favor of it, with one testifying the parcel is the "crown jewel of the Milk River."

The majority of the comments came from Hill County-area residents, with about 100 of them gathering at a hotel conference room in Havre. Most were against to the purchase, mainly based on the price tag, the process, difficult public access, the source of funding and the possibility that the land eventually may become home to bison from Yellowstone National Park.

Bruce Kapperud, a landowner adjacent to the Aagesons' ranch, also wondered who will maintain the gravel and dirt road that leads to the property, as well as take care of weeds and other management items.

"It's my understanding Fish, Wildlife and Parks doesn't have the people or money to maintain this and there's already a backlog," Kapperud told the commission. "If you approve this I will not allow hunters on my land and others are saying that too. So I'm figuring that's maybe 50,000 acres that wouldn't be allowed for hunting, and restricted from hunters."

Sen. John Brendan, R-Scobey, who chairs the Fish and Game senate committee, called the property "stones and bones" and threatened to carry legislation that would force FWP to pay taxes on the purchase price when it buys property.

"This goes from 15th (on a FWP project list) to first," Brendan said. "This doesn't even pass the smell test."

Vito Quatraro, with the Montana Sportsmen Alliance, said his group was asking FWP to extend the comment period in order to learn more about the sale.

"If you don't, then we are in opposition to the purchase," Quatraro said. "Montana Sportsmen Alliance strongly supports the acquisition of land by FWP to provide access and opportunities, but we want to make sure we acquire the best property for the money. What we see with this purchase are several problems.

He added that the land might make a good state park, but that money raised by the sale of hunting licenses shouldn't pay for a park.

Yet others praised the purchase.

"This is important to conservation," said Martha Kauffman, the managing director of northern plains for the World Wildlife Fund. "This is a unique opportunity to protect a long stretch of riparian habitat."

Carey Schmidt, of Missoula, added that he's enjoyed hunting on the ranch for the past three years.

"The deer hunting and upland game bird hunting is excellent, and when the elk are present, it's a great opportunity," Schmidt said. "Lots of land gets locked up and it's important for Fish, Wildlife and Parks to preserve this."

The Public Land/Water Access Association reversed itself a second time, with President John Gibson saying that while they originally supported the project, then sought an extension of the public comment period, the group rethought their stance and now supports the acquisition.

"One of our officers is a land appraiser and tells me these kinds of appraisals go through serious scrutiny," Gibson said. "To suggest it's over-priced compared to something 50 miles away or down the road means nothing."

Gary Anderson, a Malta real estate agent who had listed the property at one point for \$16 million, said he had trouble coming up with a price tag for the ranch. He described looking at the parcel and wrestling with cost comparisons.

"I said this is historic, prehistoric, deeded land on both sides of the river. I said this is the crown jewel of the Milk River," Anderson testified. "If this passes by on this trip, it will be purchased in the near future at many more times the dollars you're talking about today."

Commissioner Shane Colton said he struggled with the project in some respects, but concluded that it would benefit Montana sportsmen and women. He said the rankings of projects are never set in stone and that criticism of the purchase is "a bit misplaced."

"What's difficult to determine is if the objections are to the proposal, to this administration or to FWP owning land," Colton said. "I think it's fair to say that the latter part is driving much of the discussion."

Reporter Eve Byron: 447-4076, eve.byron@helenair.com or [Twitter.com/IR_EveByron](https://twitter.com/IR_EveByron)

FWP Commission showed lack of respect*Written by Vito R. Quatraro**Feb. 03*

greatfalls Tribune.com

Recently, the FWP Commission approved the Milk River Ranch purchase by a 4-1 vote. This purchase showed a total lack of respect for the sportsmen who fund Habitat Montana, which provided most of the funding for this purchase.

For those unfamiliar with this purchase, it is important to understand that the FWP has a ranking process used to rank properties before acquiring them through purchase or easements. The Milk River Ranch ranked 15th out of 15 projects yet was vaulted to No. 1 without explanation or justification.

A formal request was made of the commission to extend the public comment period to Feb. 1, and recommended that a second appraisal be done prior to approving this purchase. They were also asked to provide detailed explanations regarding the ranking process and wildlife value. The commission denied this request.

The vote ignored valid questions regarding property value, violation of the ranking process and loss of other valuable hunting/fishing opportunities.

It should also be noted that the regular process is for the acquisition to be approved by the FWP Commission, then sent to the Land Board for final approval. In this instance, it was approved by the Land Board first, then sent to the commission. One can only speculate as to why normal process was ignored. There was a definite push from leadership to get this purchase closed prior to the end of 2012. Was the commission acting with autonomy or were they receiving direction from above?

This purchase, which closed within two weeks of commission approval, has drained Habitat Montana funds to the point no other acquisitions can be made until the fund is replenished with hunter dollars. We lost the opportunity to acquire more acreage, better habitat, larger wildlife populations and better access for the sportsmen/women of the state.

The consequences of that FWP Commission approval can already be seen: by the legislation being brought forth; loss of credibility with sportsmen; loss of credibility with landowners; loss of credibility with FWP personnel; loss of credibility with legislators; loss of opportunity to purchase far better habitat/wildlife resources; loss of public access to substantial acreage that is being closed off to hunting by disgruntled landowners; and ultimately loss of the credibility of the Habitat Montana program.

The lack of substantive questions and comments by the commissioners may have confirmed suspicions that the decision had been made prior to the meeting and the public comment was just a "show" to meet public meeting requirements. It seems that there was no real intention on their part to assimilate the public comments into the decision making process. The commission was also reluctant to allow additional public comment. People take time off from work and drive many miles to participate in the process and to be locked out by those in charge shows a total lack of respect and tells us that our opinions and "the process" do not matter!

The vote seems politically motivated, fiscally irresponsible, and violated the fiduciary responsibilities as trustees to the people of Montana.

All of these repercussions could have been avoided by granting a 45-day extension, spending a few thousand dollars for a second appraisal before spending \$4.7 million, and providing valid explanations for ignoring and circumventing FWP procedures/processes in selecting lands to be acquired.

While the Milk River Ranch may be a valuable property that should be in public ownership, the state should not pay more than fair market value. The value of this property may well lay with components other than fish and wildlife but that is an inappropriate use of Habitat Montana funds and hunter dollars.

Thank you, Commissioner Moody, for standing up for sportsmen's interests.

Headwaters Sportsmen Association is a firm supporter of fee title purchases/easements, supported by process, that are properly vetted among sportsmen. For additional information including multiple articles, ranking sheets for the various available properties, etc., visit www.montanasporsmenalliance.com.

Vito R. Quatraro is president of the Bozeman-based Headwaters Sportsmen Association.



To search, type and hit enter

Home News Obituaries Sports Gallery Legal and Public Notices Contact Us Classifieds Calendar

View My Content

Home » News

SHARE

Weather

Partly Cloudy 34.0 F

Bison Protest Limits Hunting

Farmers And Ranchers Close Land To Hunting; Fundraiser Planned To Support Lawsuit

BY SAMAR FAY COURIER EDITOR

Published: Wednesday, October 10th, 2012

Farmers and ranchers in Valley and Phillips counties, the grassy prairie that some envision as an American Serengeti for free-roaming bison, have turned their opposition to this plan back on Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in a new way. To demonstrate that they do not accept FWP's translocation of Yellowstone bison to northeast Montana, about 70 landowners have cut years-long ties with FWP's game management programs and the hunter friends they have hosted on their land.

The decisions have been announced in newspaper advertisements in The Courier and The Phillips County News. The first to make the public move were the Stonebergs on Horse Ranch, some 40 miles south of Hinsdale on Timber Creek, the home of Ron and Rose Stoneberg, and their daughter Sierra Holt, her husband, Jason Holt, and their daughter, Zora.

Their Aug. 15 ad stated that Horse Ranch was no longer in FWP's Block Management program, which pays landowners to open almost 8 million acres of private property to public hunting. "We are against state FWP policies that adversely affect hunters and landowners," they said, without referring specifically to bison relocation, although all of the adult members of the family have written opinion pieces on the subject.

The ad said hunters were welcome and should come to the ranch house for permission to hunt.

Two weeks later, eight farms and ranches in north Valley County announced that they were closed to all hunting because of FWP management decisions and fire danger. That ad has been running continuously for seven weeks.

On Sept. 19, the names of 48 landowners, mostly from western Valley County and Phillips County, appeared under a statement that "since our ranch/farm operations would not survive with wild, free-ranging bison/buffalo," they were closing their land to hunting until FWP drops its plan to release them in Montana.

The message concluded with the hope that their hunter friends would understand and assist this effort to "protect our livelihoods and communities."

Another 15 producers from northern Valley County published their names under the same statement on Sept. 26.

The Phillips County News ran the statement on Oct. 3 with the names combined into a list of 63 landowners.

Farmers and ranchers opposed the plan to relocate quarantined wild bison from Yellowstone Park to the Fort Peck and Fort Belknap Indian Reservations, saying they feared the possible spread of brucellosis into their cattle herds and the damage that escaped bison would do to crops and hay yards. They watch Phillips and Valley county ranches being bought up for wild bison conservation by the American Prairie Foundation, and worry about the future of their grazing leases.

The landowners do not protest the domestic herds of bison, including tribal herds, that are scattered throughout Montana. There is legal recourse if a domestic animal causes damages, but none for a wild animal.

A group of ranchers, property rights advocates, state legislators and organizations including the Valley County Commission obtained a restraining order last spring against shipping the bison, but they arrived at Fort Peck anyway, so the group sued FWP for contempt of court. This move mostly failed in a District Court in September, but FWP did ask for a new judge to look into the remaining indirect contempt charge. The bison, now numbering nearly 80, are under a judge's order not to be moved to Fort Belknap, as had been planned, or anywhere else.

One of the groups joined in the lawsuit against FWP is Citizens for Balanced Use, which advocates for private property rights. Montana Community Preservation Alliance is hosting a fundraiser in Malta with the proceeds going to help Citizens for Balanced Use block any further movement of these bison in the state. There will be a supper of homemade soup, bread sticks and dessert on Tuesday, Oct. 16, at 6 p.m. at the Lucky Bullet in Malta.





According to the event organizers, Kerry White, founder of Citizens for Balanced Use, is planning to attend and they hope that their attorney in the lawsuit, Cory Swanson, will be there.

Citizens for Balanced Use is a 501(c)3 organization so all contributions are tax deductible. To contribute to this event, send a check payable to CBU to Box 1015, Malta, MT 59538.

To search, type and hit enter

[Home](#) [News](#) [Obituaries](#) [Sports](#) [Gallery](#) [Legal and Public Notices](#) [Contact Us](#) [Classifieds](#) [Calendar](#) View My Content

Home » News

 SHARE   

COUNTY JOINS BISON LAWSUIT

SAMAR FAY, COURIER EDITOR

Published: Wednesday, March 14th, 2012

The Valley County commissioners voted 2-1 Tuesday to join other plaintiffs in a lawsuit aimed at halting Fish, Wildlife & Parks' transfer of quarantined Yellowstone Park bison to the Fort Peck and Fort Belknap reservations.

The lawsuit alleges that FWP violated Montana law by enacting a bison translocation plan without a having a management plan and without adequate analysis of the impacts upon the human environment. SB 212, passed by the legislature in 2011, establishes multiple requirements for FWP in the management of bison that the lawsuit alleges are not being observed.

There are 15 plaintiffs, including Jason and Sierra Stoneberg Holt and Rose Stoneberg, who ranch on Timber Creek south of Hinsdale. Also listed are people representing Citizens for Balanced Use, United Property Owners of Montana and Missouri River Stewards, plus some ranchers in Blaine County. The defendants are FWP director Joseph Maurier, Montana FWP and the FWP Commission.

In Tuesday's discussion, the commissioners objected most to being bypassed in the cooperation and consultation phase of the bison transplant. They said FWP did not contact the four affected counties at all, and have not adequately planned for proper fencing or dealing with likely escapes.

"The state of Montana is running over us again and I'm sick and tired of it," said Commissioner Dave Pippin. "We support the tribes' having bison but that doesn't give FWP permission to go outside the written law. They should do the right thing." He said they should have done an environmental impact study and called their plan half-baked.

"If FWP had worked with the counties, that would be the end of it," Commissioner Dave Reinhardt said. "They have to cooperate and coordinate with us but they don't have to do what we say."

Commissioner Bruce Peterson said he voted against the motion because of a private property issue.

"We shouldn't have bison running around Valley County," he said. "But the tribes have private property. We're cutting them off from getting bison. We have no business where they get their bison."

The county commissioners wrote a letter of protest after the FWP Commission approved the transfer of 68 Yellowstone bison in December of 2011.



Return To Website

Turmoil as FWP Looks to Buy Spotted Dog Ranch

siteadmin posted on July 15, 2010 10:13

Wednesday evening the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks held a public hearing to discuss their proposed purchase of a nearly 28,000 acre ranch near Deer Lodge. The following article is a recap of that meeting from Phil Drake with "Montana Watchdog." For information on the FWP's proposed purchase of the Spotted Dog Ranch, please read "MT FWP Could Soon Purchase 28,000 Acre Ranch."

Governor's role in proposed land sale called into question
BY PHIL DRAKE, DEER LODGE

The governor's role in the proposed purchase about 28,000 acres near Avon for \$16.5 million was called into question Wednesday by several residents at a public hearing.

"This thing smells," said Carl Nyman of Anaconda, who said he came to the meeting thinking that buying the land would be a good idea. "Now, I'm not sure."

And the former head of the state Fish, Wildlife & Parks Department, the same agency proposing the deal, said he opposed the funding source the state wants to use.

More than 100 people packed into the Deer Lodge Community Center to hear the proposal by the FWP to use funds overseen by state Natural Resource Damage Program to buy the Spotted Dog Ranch. The land, owned by Y-T Timber LLC and under lease to purchase by Rock Creek Cattle Co., is bordered on two sides by national forest property. Plans are to turn the ranch into state wildlife management area and have seasonal public access.

Officials said the proposal qualifies for NRDP funding by restoring or replacing resources injured by mining and smelting in the Upper Clark Fork basin. But it requires amending the NRDP's grant process to get funding outside the regular NRDP grant cycle. But criticism arose after residents learned Gov. Brian Schweitzer was first contacted by Rock Creek Cattle Co., which was going to buy the property from Y-T for \$9 million and then sell it to the state for about \$15 million. The remainder of the \$16.5 million price tag would be for other costs, such as maintenance, officials said. The governor reportedly asked the FWP to look into the matter.

"It's a political cram down," Nyman said. "It undermines the credibility of the governor's office ... and the department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks."

Mike Thompson, state regional wildlife manager with FWP, said the property had been appraised for about \$15 million. And Carol Fox of the NRDP said the sale was being "expedited" because of the nature of negotiations.

Jim Flynn, a former FWP director, told state staff he opposed using NRDP funds to buy the land. Flynn, who is also a former chairman of the NRDP Citizens Advisory Committee, said he had to balance two loyalties. "If you look at the funding source there are problems," he said. "The priority (for NRDC money) should be for restoration."

The state is expected to reach a decision by late August.

Source: Phil Drake, **Montana Watchdog**
Posted by Haylie Shipp

Posted in: Today's Top 5, Livestock Markets, Grain Markets, General News
Actions: E-mail | Permalink | Comments (0) | Kick it! | DZone it! | del.icio.us

MEMBER CENTER | Create Account | Log In

Search/Keyword Search

HELENA, MT | CONTINUOUS NEWS COVERAGE



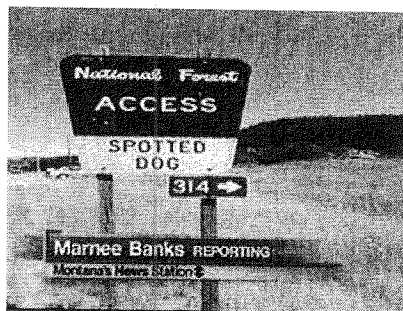
Home Weather Videos & Photos Cameras Sports Contests and Promotions U.S./World Jobs/EEO

KXLH NEWS

Montana Land Board approves Spotted Dog Ranch purchase

Posted: Aug 17, 2010 9:04 AM by Marnee Banks (KXLH-Helena)

Updated: Aug 17, 2010 9:04 AM



Despite strong criticism, Montana's top five elected officials approved spending \$16.5-million dollars on the 28,000-acre Spotted Dog Ranch property.

The Montana Land Board unanimously approved the purchase of the property by MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks, which has applied for the funding through the Natural Resource Damage Program and received support of the FWP Commission.

Several citizens have criticized the purchase as being rushed, and others say the state should not keep buying land it has no money or plan to manage.

Governor Brian Schweitzer has championed the land deal and touts its value to Montana.

Paul Sihler, FWP Field Services Division administrator, said, "This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for conservation. Fish Wildlife and Parks and the Elk Foundation have been seeking to conserve this property for over a decade and the deal has just never worked out in the past."

The Spotted Dog land purchase must go before the Natural Resource Damage Council, which will then will advise the Governor on whether or not to approve the purchase.

(August 5, 2010) The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission has approved a proposal to purchase 27,000 acres of land east of Missoula known as the Spotted Dog Ranch. The acquisition has drawn quite a bit of controversy, and FWP received over 100 comments on the \$16.5-million dollar property.

FWP staff reports that people are concerned about the state owning more land, and wonder how the state will maintain it. Other comments expressed concerns over rushing the grant process to get the land funded.

Like 1

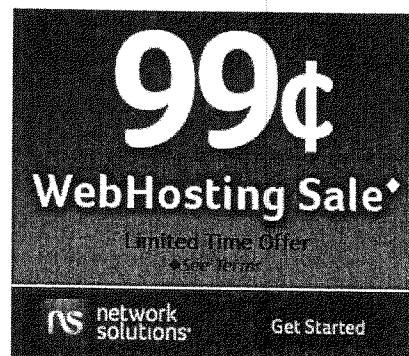
Tweet 1

0

SHARE

Rating:

4.0 (2 votes)



MOST CLICKED (48 HOURS)

- Bullet holes and casings found at I-15 parking area near Wolf Creek
- Suspect in custody in Whitefish death
- TX teen narrowly escapes death after smoking synthetic marijuana
- Tough times for Montana Horse Sanctuary
- Montana grizzly bear picks Baltimore Ravens to win Super Bowl
- Motive still not known in ex-Navy SEAL's murder
- Great Falls Native Discusses Grandson, New York Jets QB

MOST CLICKED (5 DAYS)

- Gleed sentenced to 20 years for placing toddler son in scalding water
- Man arrested on shoplifting charge, tried to steal officer's gun
- Associated Food Stores scaling back in Helena, Billings
- Bullet holes and casings found at I-15 parking area near Wolf Creek
- Suspect in custody in Whitefish death
- TX teen narrowly escapes death after smoking synthetic marijuana
- Snow sculpture art: tiger and zebra

KXLH.com is social!



Joe Maurier, director of FWP, said, "Nobody has dealt with the issue of when you have an opportunity that has to be acted on quickly. What is the process? People talk about, 'Oh the process, the process,' in this case we have something that we know is very valuable and that is being moved forward."

FWP has requested funding from the Natural Resource Damage Program; the program was created to restore or replace injured natural resources in the Upper Clark Fork River Basin.

The NRDP council will meet later this month to consider funding the grant, but Governor Schweitzer will make the final decision on whether or not to purchase the land.

[Click here to watch an extended interview](#) with Governor Schweitzer about the property.

Controversy over proposed Spotted Dog land purchase (EXTENDED INTERVIEW) Posted 2 weeks 6 days 18 hours ago

COMMENTS



Add a comment...


Comment using...

Facebook social plugin

99¢

WebHosting Sale*

Limited Time Offer
*See Terms


 **ns network solutions**

[Get Started](#)

99¢

WebHosting Sale*

Limited Time Offer
*See Terms

 **ns network solutions**

[Get Started](#)

[Home](#) | [Weather](#) | [Sports](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Montana CBS News Sites - [KTVQ](#), [Billings](#) | [KBZK](#), [Bozeman](#) | [KXLF](#), [Butte](#) | [KRTV](#), [Great Falls](#) | [KXLH](#), [Helena](#) | [KPAX](#), [Missoula](#) | [KAJ](#), [Kalispell](#)

© 2013, KXLH.com, Helena, MT, and Cordillera Interactive. [Privacy Policy](#) (updated 1/10/10) | [Terms of Service](#) (updated 12/10/09)

Search Yellow Pages: Popular Searches: [A](#) [JA](#) Powered by Local.com